

Metaphors of the Soul

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Introduction:

A recent trend in American culture is the proliferation of non-fiction publications discussing the importance of the soul in everyday life. The soul has reemerged as a cultural entity inheriting the legacy of self-help psychology, offering Americans, particularly middle class baby boomers, a locus for their angst and discontents.

The goal of this paper is to explore the language of the soul in these recent texts, specifically the metaphors used to characterize the soul. Through an analysis of metaphor, we will be able to better understand the cultural meanings the soul bears in the final years of the twentieth century.

Historical meanings

In Greek and early Christian texts, the soul inhabited the transcendental realm (Tarnas, 1991). Pythagoras viewed the individual human soul being assimilated with the world soul resulting in the creative mind of the universe. Pythagoras wrote that the mysteries of nature and human soul could be revealed through intellectual and moral discipline.

Christian views of the soul appropriated Greek thought but wrote the entity into a different context with modified meanings. In the early

Christian context, the soul became immortal, capable of salvation and redemption. As Christian thought progressed, the soul was situated in opposition to the flesh and biological instincts. This view reaches its purest form in fundamental Protestantism, under which the soul is saved only through denial of passions, hard work, and close reading of the Bible (Tarnas, 1991).

The Christian view of the soul is a transcendental notion, in which the soul exists within and outside the individual person, bridging Man and God.

The Role of Metaphor

The soul is nearly a perfect candidate for metaphor. Metaphor is commonly used to express concepts which would be difficult if not impossible to convey in literal language (Gibbs, 1994). Psychological states and entities are among the most difficult concepts to convey through literal language and which rely on metaphor for their expression. For example, the metaphorical phrase “the idea just came to me”, could awkwardly be phrased “a few moments ago, the neurons in my cerebral cortex have released and received neurotransmitters to constitute a pattern that I perceived as a conscious thought”. Metaphor allows us to construct and communicate these psychological states efficiently.

Psychological entities, such as the soul and the mind are even more problematic. These entities have no clear physical correlate, are not visible, and may only exist through metaphorical language.

There has been extensive research on metaphors for the mind (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Barnden 1997). In the research literature, metaphors for the mind include:

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the mind as container
ideas and the mind as physical objects
ideas and the mind as possessions
ideas and the mind as sharable commodities
ideas and the mind as other animate beings
the mind as physical space

These metaphors enable people to talk about the mind as an entity which generates, holds, and communicates ideas and feelings.

As meanings of a concept, such as the soul, changes, the metaphors constructing this concept should change. The purpose of this study is to examine contemporary metaphors of the soul in an attempt to define its reality popular American culture.

Linguistic accounts

Wierzbica (1992), as part of an ongoing project attempting to discover semantic primitives and universals by examining cross-cultural instantiations and concepts, argues that the soul, as conceptualized in Western English cultures has clear domain boundaries. Wierzbica argues this about the English concept of the soul.

it is one of two parts of a person
one cannot see it
it is part of another world
good beings are part of that world
things are not part of that world
other people cannot know what happens in that part of the person
sometimes the person doesn't know what these things are
these things can be good or bad
because of these things, the person can be a good person

Wierzbaca's account is consistent with the transcendental view reported above, the soul is located within man and god, is real but invisible, and is capable of morality and immorality.

It will be argued in this paper that metaphors of the soul constitute a more reliable definition of the soul and that in contemporary literature it has shifted from a transcendental to a psychological reality. It will be shown that the meanings of the soul, as expressed in modern metaphors, span a wide psychological territory.

The Corpus

The corpus for this study consisted of three self help books which popularized interest in the soul in the late 1990's. One book in particular, *Care of the Soul* (Moore, 1992) appeared on best seller lists both as a hardback and paperback. The two other books, *Blue Fire* (Hillman, 1989), and *The Soul's Code* (Hillman, 19??), were less commercially successful, but dealt with similar themes as *Care of the Soul*. The essence of these books was that the soul should be placed at the center of everyday life, and should become the focus of mental well being. After publication of these books, a number of "Soul" books appeared on the market. It was clear that the soul was being resurrected in American culture, perhaps with new meaning.

The Soul as Human

The soul as human metaphor is consistent with Barnden's Soul as Animate Being or Living Body. However, for the soul, the metaphors in this study are derived primarily from the human domain. In the metaphor Soul as Human, the soul is endowed with human characteristics through human abilities or involved in human, often social, activities.

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One means of referring the soul as a human is to situate the soul as the object of perception, and perceive this entity as human, as in the following example:

(1) The soul has been imaged as the inner man.

In this passive sentence the soul is imaged, by an unnamed agent as an inner man. The term “inner man” is itself a metaphor. In this metaphor, there is no evidence that the soul as actually been perceived, but is assumed to exist.

Another conceptual domain mapped onto in the Soul as Human metaphor is that of human activity. In these examples, the soul is characterized as being engaged in human activities:

(2) one's soul can be on trial

(3) Perhaps without knowing it, we are engaged in the labors of the soul.

(4) Observing what the soul is doing and hearing what it is saying is a way of “going with the symptom.

Example (2) is an instance of a common conceptual domain for the soul derived from the criminal justice conceptual domain. The soul is often referred to as being judged, tried, condemned, freed, and saved. These expressions map the soul onto the justice and crime conceptual domain, in which the soul is the object of criminal justice proceedings. Within the justice and criminal domain, the soul is never the judge, but the judged. The soul is always the object of investigation as in these examples:

(5) witness to my soul

(6) his soul has been condemned

(7) my soul has been freed

In example (3) the soul is characterized as being an agent, en-

gaged in human labor. Within this domain, the soul, as in the justice and crime domains, is placed in a subordinate position. To labor is to work for another, implying that the soul is subject to a master, not working for itself.

A third means of characterizing the soul as human is to personify the soul with human cognitive capabilities. In example (4) the soul is given the human abilities of hearing, speaking, and doing. Within this domain, the soul is given the means to act upon and participate in world and human affairs.

The Soul as an Emotional Human

Another frequent metaphor for the soul, within the human conceptual domain, is the soul as an emotional or striving human or animate being. In the current soul literature, the soul is characterized as a sentient, emotional being, more often than it is read as a rational being as these examples illustrate:

- (8) All of these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and let us know what the soul craves.
- (9) We spend great sums of money on electronic entertainment centers that don't speak to the soul's need for childlike pleasure.
- (10) The soul has a need for childlike pleasure, the soul is a child, the soul is not an adult, but an immature inner entity, entitled to the pleasures of childhood.
- (11) The frustration of this soul in face of the uniformity and impersonality of great walls and towers, destroys like a barbarian what it cannot comprehend.
- (12) The soul that is uncared for—whether in personal or com-

munity life——turns into an angry child.

In example (8) the soul is characterized as a being which craves. The word craves denotes intense desire, leaving the being in extreme discomfort when denied. The soul then is an animate being, probably human, which wants, desires, needs, and suffers its needs are not met.

Example (9) characterizes the soul as not only a desiring being, but a child. This childlike desire gives the soul the qualities and leniency afforded one who is not a mature adult. It also casts the soul as a being that seeks pleasure, and does not or cannot deny itself pleasure. Unlike an adult, the soul does not sacrifice its pleasure for the good of others, delay pleasure until a more opportune time, or simply understand that pleasure cannot be attained.

In examples (10) and (11) the soul is characterized as a denied emotional being, which has turned angry. In example (11) the soul is cast in the role of a victim of an oppressive system, which ignores its uniqueness and imposes "uniformity and impersonality". The soul reacts to this system not rationally, but violently, destroying like a barbarian, perhaps indiscriminately. In example (12) the soul is cast as a child, neglected by caregivers, not given attention or nurturance.

In examples (11) and (12) the soul is given emotional, almost pathological, responses to an indifferent or hostile environment. The soul's only concern is the narcissistic self, its only response is anger.

The Souls as an Animate Being

Although the central metaphor for the soul is human, it is also characterized as non-human, or not necessarily human animate being. In these examples, the soul is characterized as an animate being, but not necessarily human.

- (13) Like an animal, the soul feeds on whatever life grows in its immediate environment.
- (14) Just as the mind digests ideas and produces intelligence, the soul feeds on life and digests it, creating wisdom and character out of the fodder of experience.
- (15) The soul presents itself in a variety of colors

In example (13) the soul is referred to as an animal, feeding on life. Through the act of feeding, the soul is characterized as an entity of hunger and consumption, acting on its instincts and needs. Continuing the feeding metaphor, in example (14) the soul is given to further digestive processes. Its character shifts from a consuming being to a creative one, creating wisdom for the person who possesses the soul.

Example (15) does not specify whether the soul is animate or inanimate. However, changing colors, intentionally, is a quality only living beings possess. This phrase “presents itself in a variety of colors” suggests an intentional act, for a variety of affects.

In the following examples, the metaphor Soul as Physical Object is reported, this is consistent with Barnden’s Mind as Physical Object metaphor.

- (16) Soul doesn’t pour into life automatically. It requires our skill and attention.
- (17) The soul of the family evaporates in the thin air of this kind or reduction.
- (18) Part of our alchemical work with soul is to extract myth from the hard details of family history and memory on the principle that increase of imagination is always an increase in soul.
- (19) the image of the odyssey serves the many-faceted soul.

In example (16) the soul is “poured” giving it the qualities of a liq-

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uid. The “pouring” is not performed by the soul itself, which cannot automatically pour or be poured, but by an agent acting on the soul, who is advised to pour the soul with skill and attention.

The soul is characterized as a similar substance in example (17) in which the soul changes from a liquid to a gaseous state. Example (18) is consistent with the “soul as substance” metaphor, increasing and decreasing giving it qualities of quantification. Also in example (18) the practice of alchemy is mentioned, suggesting, as (16) and (17) the soul is a substance which undergoes change.

In example (19) the soul is characterized by the metaphorical adjectival phrase “many faceted”, referring the soul as a three dimensional object, specifically a gem. The phrase “many faceted” is also used to modify human personalities and ideas as in a “many faceted theory” or “many faceted interests”. This type of metaphorical expression, which draws from a special domain, particularly that of three dimensional objects, is used to characterize psychological traits and ideas as in “well rounded personality” or “many sides of an argument”.

Soul as Possession

The soul is often characterized as a possession modified with possessive adjectives. This is consistent with Barnden’s Mind as Body Part metaphor, as in “I will love her with all my soul”, however, possessive metaphors also occur in which there is no reference to human body parts.

A frequent metaphor used when discussing the soul is to refer to it as a possession as in “my soul” or “his soul”. This suggests a similar use of possessive pronouns as when referring to human body parts as in “my heart” or “my leg”. In fact, the soul is characterized as a part

of the body which can be removed from its owner through the use of medical instruments, as in this example:

- (20) I am being asked to take some soul stuff away. I should go to my toolbox and take out a scalpel, extractor, and suction pump.

However, when the Soul as Possession metaphor is used, it either does not specify any body part, or draws from the Soul as Object metaphorical conceptual domain. These following metaphors characterize the soul as an object:

- (21) There are parables describing possession of the soul and sale of the soul.
(22) She is the keeper of the soul.
(23) The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and social, is "loss of soul".

The metaphorical expression "selling one's soul", casts the soul as an object whose ownership is transferred from one person to another through a monetary exchange. In the metaphorical expression "possess one's soul" the soul is owned by a person, and stolen or taken against the owner's will by another. These metaphorical expressions cast the soul as an object, which can be held, owned, taken, transferred, lost, found, kept, bought and sold.

Other metaphorical expressions which characterize the soul as a possession emphasize not the object, but the owner, as in these examples:

- (24) We can be the curates or curators of our own souls.
(25) Tending the things around us and becoming sensitive to the importance of home, daily schedule, and maybe even the clothes we wear, are ways of caring for the soul.

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These metaphors characterize the soul as a possession, which depends upon its owner for maintenance or its well being. In example (24) the roles of “curate” and “curator” cast the soul as a sacred or valuable possession, housed, and in the care of a designated individual. Whereas a curator would be responsible for an object, the implied caretaker in example (25) is in possession of an animate being as one would care for a child, a pet, or a plant.

Soul as the Afflicted

A recently common metaphoric expression of the soul is that of an animate being, frequently human, who is vulnerable to illness, either psychological or physical, and is often suffering from a type of affliction. The following examples illustrate the metaphor Soul as Afflicted:

- (26) Where there is no artfulness about life, there is a weakening of soul.
- (27) Our hospitals are not equipped to deal with the soul in illness.
- (28) The soul sees by means of affliction.
- (29) If things have soul, then they can also suffer and become neurotic: such is the nature of the soul.
- (30) As we get to know the soul and fearlessly consider its oddities and the many different ways it shows itself among individuals, we may develop a taste for the perverse. We may come to appreciate its quirks and deviance's.

In example (26) the soul is said to be weakened through experiencing an artless life. This metaphorical expression gives the soul qualities of vulnerability, reactivity, and loss of well being when faced with the deprivation of ascetic experiences.

Example (27) extends this metaphor characterizing the soul as ill.

Furthermore, in this example, our medical institutions are unable to treat the soul's illnesses. This metaphorical expression gives the soul the qualities of a living being, who suffers from a biological weakness, either caused by injury or infection. In this metaphorical expression, illness is a specific form of weakness, drawing from the medical conceptual domain.

The soul is characterized as being afflicted in example (28). In this metaphoric expression, the soul sees through its affliction, through a perceptual quality, which is made possible, or enhanced by its afflicted, vulnerable condition.

A more specific metaphor for affliction is expressed in example (29) in which the soul is characterized as neurotic. This places the soul in the psychological conceptual domain, where frustrated needs give rise to behavioral symptoms expressed through the repression, sublimation, or hysteria.

Example (30) further specifies the soul as being perverse and deviant. This expression is consistent with the previous examples, characterizing the soul as psychologically afflicted. The soul now not only suffers psychological trauma, but manifests symptoms which are perverse, divine, hence inappropriate and unacceptable to common social standards. The lost soul, has become the victim of mistreatment replacing the transcendental soul which succumbs to sinful temptations.

The Soul and Spatial Conceptual Domains

The soul is characterized as an entity which exists in physical space, moves in physical space, and can itself be a two or three dimensional spatial location. These metaphorical expressions characterize the soul as existing in physical space:

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- (31) But if we were to think of the soul as being in the world, then maybe our work would be seen as truly an important aspect of our lives. . .
- (32) Soul enters life from below, through the cracks, finding an opening into life at the points where smooth functioning breaks down.
- (33) Yet through depression we enter depths and in depths find soul.
- (34) For the Greeks, the underworld was the proper home of the soul, and if we are to have depth and soul, we need some relationship to this knowledge is not opposed to soul.
- (35) Soul is closely connected to fate,
- (36) We usually overlook the way soulfulness can adhere to ordinary housework and the gifts it can bring to the soul.
- (37) The esophagus is an excellent image of one of the soul's chief functions: to transfer material of the outside world into the interior.

In example (31) the soul exists "in the world", spatially located. The soul is characterized as an entity moving through space in example (32) "moving through the cracks". In example (33) the soul is located in space, where it can be found "in depths". In examples (34), (35), and (36) the soul exists in physical space in relation to other entities. In example (34) the soul is characterized in a possible oppositional relationship to knowledge, connected to fate in example (35) and adhering to housework in example (36). In example (37) the soul is given the quality of a conduit, where material is transferred from the outside world to the interior.

Like the Barnden's Mind as Physical Space metaphor, the soul is

also conceived as physical space, as the following examples illustrate:

- (38) Yet it is obvious that the soul, seat of the deepest emotions, can benefit greatly from the gifts of a vivid spiritual life.
- (39) Individuality rises out of soul as water rises out of the depths of the earth.
- (40) One can search one's soul
- (41) a deeply felt, risky, unpredictable tour of the soul
- (42) We will be making father all the while we are surrendering to the winds and weather brought by the gods as our education in the geography and citizenry of the soul.

The metaphorical expressions in examples (38) and (39) locate the soul a specific location, assigning it as the “seat of the deepest emotions” and a place from which “individuality rises”. The Soul as Place metaphor is extended in examples (40) and (41) as spatial locations through which other entities can “tour” or “search”. Example (42) is an explicit metaphorical expression, referring to the soul as a geographical location in which citizens can reside.

Soul as a Vehicle on a Journey

A more specific use of the Soul in Physical Space metaphor is the Soul as a Vehicle on a Journey metaphor. This is actual a conceptual blend (Turner 1966), in which the soul is constructed through blending human characteristics of intentional motion, and the Soul in Physical Space metaphor. The following examples illustrate:

- (43) We can respond to our own soul as it winds its way through the maze of our life's unfolding.
- (44) The life of the soul, as the structure of dreams reveals, is a continual going over and over of the material of life.

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- (45) Who is my father? I won't know until the soul has been on its odyssey and returns with its stories of love.
- (46) The dimension of soul is depth (not breadth or height) and the dimension of our soul travel is downward.

The metaphorical expressions (43) to (46) clearly characterize the soul as a vehicle on a journey. In example (43) the soul is an agent that navigates through the "maze of life", in which life itself is metaphorically characterized as a geographical location. Example (44) is less direct than the other metaphors, only expressing movement of the soul, "going over, and over", emphasizing motion, but not agency or purpose, as a journey would imply. The metaphorical expressions in examples (45) and (46) fully characterize the soul on a journey, on an "odyssey" in example (45) and as a soul traveling in example (46).

Soul as Progenitor

Two types of Soul as Progenitor metaphors were found in the corpus, human and non-human. The human Soul as Progenitor metaphors characterize the soul as a biological parent. The non-human metaphors characterized the soul as a source of energy or power acting as a source of creation. The metaphors characterizing the Soul as Progenitor are listed below:

- (47) The spirit is a being born of the soul.
- (48) the child of the soul
- (49) So we see that the union of opposites between ego and Soul produces something of infinite value, the spirit child.
- (50) Soul is the font of who we are, and yet it is far beyond our capacity to devise and to control.
- (51) The power of the soul, in contrast, is more like a great reser-

voir, or in traditional imagery, like the force of water in a fast-rushing river.

Metaphorical expressions (47), (48), and (49) cast the soul in the image of a biological parent. The soul gives birth (47), bears a child (48), and joins in a sexual union with the ego and produces a child (49). In contrast the metaphorical expressions (50) and (51) do not imply human form, but give the soul the quality of power or energy in the form of water. In example (50) the soul is cast as a font from which we originate, and in example (51) the soul is characterized as a reservoir.

Conclusion

A general conclusion that can be drawn from the metaphors analyzed in this study is contrary to Wierzbica who argues the soul is a transcendental entity, bridging the human world and spirit world, capable of good and evil. These contemporary constructions of the soul characterize the soul as a psychological, human entity, rather than a transcendent one. Furthermore, rather than representing an entity endowed with good or bad moral qualities, in current texts, the soul is characterized with human, moral qualities, vulnerable to physical and mental distress, illness and emotional needs.

The soul, as characterized by the metaphors in this study, is nearly identical to the metaphor constellation for the mind. This suggests that the meaning given to the soul has broadened, as a category, to include most if not all of the metaphorical elements in the category of mind.

The prototypical metaphor for the soul is that of being human or possessing human qualities. In the metaphors analyzed in this study, the soul is characterized as an inner man, capable of speech, singing, emotional sensation and expression, desire, frustration, and even maladjust-

ment.

Less prototypical, are human related metaphors, consistent with mind metaphors, in which the soul is constructed as a mental entity through metaphors which have been found to characterize the mind.

The soul is also characterized as the psychological quality of humanness, that is capable of joy, but vulnerable to emotional imbalance and damage. In fact, rather than being endowed with morality, responsible for good or bad actions, the soul is most commonly seen as the victim, suffering at the hands of others and society as a whole. The emphasis is on healing, rather than reform or redemption.

The metaphors reported in this study depict a soul in transition. Replacing the transcendental soul, which bridged man and god, is the psychological soul, which becomes an inner voice for the human psychological condition. This soul is the soul of victimhood, media, self-help books, talk show confessionals, and self styled religions.

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Abstract

A recent trend in American culture is the proliferation of non-fiction publications discussing the importance of the soul in everyday life. The soul has reemerged as a cultural entity inheriting the legacy of self-help psychology, offering Americans, particularly middle class baby boomers, a locus for their angst and discontents.

Using a corpus of data drawn from popular self-help books that focus on the soul, metaphors are examined to derive meanings given to the soul as a conceptual construct.

The goal of this paper is to explore the language of the soul in these recent texts, specifically the metaphors used to characterize the soul. Through an analysis of metaphor, we will be able to better understand the cultural meanings the soul bears in the final years of the twentieth century.

It will be argued in this paper that metaphors of the soul constitute a more reliable definition of the soul and that in contemporary literature it has shifted from a transcendental to a psychological reality. It will be shown that the meanings of the soul, as expressed in modern metaphors, span a wide psychological territory.